Reflections
Sunday, December 20, 2020

“Ah Ha” moment
Anne and I were having a glass of wine together last night before dinner. I was trying to explain to her this feeling I had about the uniqueness of the opportunity that laid before Monroe. I was trying to express why it felt different that anything I had worked with before. But, I was getting tongue-tied.

It’s not like I haven’t been here before. You may remember that in my most recent past-life I worked for Minnesota’s State College and University (MnSCU) system as a mentor to small business owners. Over 20 years, I’ve worked with over 1,000 established and startup businesses. That didn’t feel awkward.

In the past-life just before MnSCU, I was president of a chain of department and specialty stores that grew from 5 stores to 17 in the 5 years I was at the helm. So, fast growth feels familiar.

Anne is great to bounce ideas off of. Two past-lives ago she was #2 in well-funded education-technology (“ed-tech”) start-up venture. She knows what it’s like to do that work and be in that environment. Three years of listening to her daily debriefs gave me real insight.

***Then it hit us*:** The reason it feels different is that we are creating an ed-tech startup within the structure of a legacy nonprofit.

Legacy Monroe: we have lots of experience developing and delivering curriculum for residential programs. We’ve done slow growth, incremental, continuous improvement over 40 years that makes our offering the best of its kind on the planet. We honed our skills to provide a truly amazing experience for our participants. We have more improvement to do and will continue to do that.

Ed-tech startup: This is the wild west. We think we know what we want to do. But not exactly…yet. I remember Anne telling me stories about how what they knew in the morning was disproved in the afternoon and they needed another solution by the next morning. The language and atmosphere of rapid iteration was what they thrived on. Staid and predictable structures/processes weren’t compatible with creating something new and innovative. They were helpful, then they got in the way.

That was it! My sense of unease disappeared as I realized that we have the challenge of living with two different ways of doing business within the same organization. Each has benefits, each downsides. Each should not get in the way of the other. Each needs to do what they do to make it work. There is no good or bad here, just what is appropriate at the moment.

That will take some getting used to. Living within two cultures will mean we all will need to wear both hats and consciously wear one or the other as the situation demands it. It means the excitement of growth and innovation paired with the patience for when we don't do it right.

It's all OK. We'll travel this rocky road together. We'll support each other to create something magnificent.

This feels like the legacy of Bob Monroe reborn. He was the consummate innovator. He often learned something new and then changed his mind mid-stream as he created new technology and the Monroe organization. It was his version of rapid iteration. It drove people nuts.

It takes the right mind-set. It takes us recognizing what will be needed to succeed. Welcome to the adventure.